Today And Tomorrow . . . By Walter Lippmann

The Succession to Stalin

THE SOVIET regime must now meet the test of succession —of how the power which has been concentrated in Stalin's hands is to be exercised after his death. Next only to a decisive defeat in a great war, this is the severest test of a regime like this one. For it has no principle of legitimate succession. No one can inherit Stalin's power. There is no line of heredity in the Soviet Union. No one can be elected to Stalin's power. There are no elections. Stalin's successor, like Stalin himself, will have what power he can take and can hold against his rivals.

It is, therefore, most improbable that there is any man, say Malenkov, who can surely take Stalin's place and carry on as before. The struggle in which Stalin made himself the successor of Lenin lasted more than 10 years. We may count on it that Stalin's true successor, if there is one, will not be established certainly for some considerable time, perhaps for many years. It could turn out that Stalin has no successor.

THE KIND of power that Stalin has exercised cannot be transferred intact. It is a kind of power that has to be grasped by the new pretender and made his own by his own actions. For the power of Stalin is not in an office which, if someone occupies it, carries with it all the prerogatives and powers. The nature of Stalin's power in the Soviet Union is more like that of the old political city boss, only of course on an imperial scale.

It is a power based on the fact that in a long struggle with his rivals over the years—by promotions, demotions, purges and liquidations—he has succeeded in putting his own men, subject to his own will, in all the key points of the regime. In the end Stalin made himself the boss of the party organization, of the bureaucracies, the secret police, the armed forces. The real power of Stalin has resided not in his titles and his office but in this machine.

THE PROBLEM of the succession in the USSR is the problem of this machine through which Stalin has governed the great organizations of which the Soviet regime is composed. They are the Communist Party, which has been Malenkov's, the Secret Police, which has been Beria's, the Bureaucracy, which, it would appear, has been Molotov's, and the armed forces, which, at last accounts, seem to have been Bulganin's.

Stalin has exercised all the ultimate power by ruling over these powerful men and through his henchmen at the key points beneath them and around them. If his successor is to take over Stalin's power, all these powerful men, except the one who is to rise to the top, and all henchmen at the key points must accept the new supreme ruler as their personal lord. It is hard to believe that this can happen easily or quickly. If it does, it will be the greatest surprise, and the most disconcerting, that has yet come out of Soviet Russia.

EVEN IF we assume that there has been worked out during Stalin's lifetime substantial agreement inside the Politburo about the succession, there is every prospect, we may suppose, that at the least there will be a period in which the new regime is preoccupied in consolidating itself. It is probable, however, that there will also be a struggle for power. And it is possible that this struggle may be severe and prolonged and momentous.

The stakes are immense for the world and for ourselves. So much is at stake that it is impossible to say too emphatically that this is the time of times when public men and all who speak and write should hold themselves to the highest rules of responsibility—avoiding all loose talk and all loose gestures, all threats, promises, prophecies, and provocations, until this country and its allies can judge soberly and seriously the new danger and the new prospects.

If there is a struggle for power inside the Soviet Union, there may be an interval when the Soviet Union appears not to be reacting to the outer world. There may be imprudent men who think this means it can never react. In such an interval we should listen to the counsel of our wisest men here and abroad. For in that interval it may be that good things can be done that would give life and hope to mankind, or that foolish and thoughtless things would be done which might bring catastrophic consequences.